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ABSTRACT

Dynamic classroom role-playing for junior and senior high school classes in literature and acting is an essential ingredient in cultivating characterization and interpretation if a student is to learn the technical skills of performance. Although no simple classroom performance blueprint exists for predicting the degree of success a student performer might achieve in meaningful role-playing, the three exercises presented in this paper are designed to provide an excellent foundation to reinforce further creative exploration by individual instructors. The goal of the first exercise ("Star Search") is to familiarize students with the role that personal observation might play in character development. A second exercise ("And the Beat Goes On") can be used to promote the role of mental symbols in character development and to cultivate student performer awareness of dramatic visualization. The third exercise ("Carry Your Character with You") shows how to develop an awareness of the role that movement and physicalization might play in suggesting character. Careful analysis of the selected literature includes reading with a critical eye, isolating the mental symbols that clearly define character intention or motivation, and a classroom performance blueprint that encourages creative self-expression. (CR)

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"Classroom 'Role-Playing' : A Basic Blueprint For Performance"

Gerald Lee Ratliff

Dynamic classroom role-playing for junior and senior high school classes in literature and acting is an essential ingredient in cultivating characterization and interpretation if a student is to learn the technical skills of performance; and to give life and meaning to the fictitious characters being studied. The classroom performance success of student performers depends upon an ability to seize role-playing opportunities provided by a selected playscript or excerpt of literature and to fill in the author's suggestive, oftentimes incomplete character outline with as much imagination and inventive "self-expression" as possible to give voice and body to a character of substantial form and substance.

Performance Blueprint

Although no simple classroom performance blueprint exists for predicting the degree of success a student performer might achieve in meaningful role-playing, the following exercises developed in classroom performance approaches to characterization should provide an excellent foundation to

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reinforce further creative exploration by individual instructors. Each instructor should implement the exercises in a manner that is comfortable and compatible with an individual style of disciplined study or creative experimentation; and each instructor is encouraged to take the liberty of adjusting, modifying, or extending the basic techniques suggested to meet the special needs of classroom assignments in reading, interpretation, or performance. The exercises are framed as participatory activities to stimulate awareness of the basic principles of classroom role-playing in terms of character development, dramatic visualization, and the potential use of mental symbols in performance. The instructor may wish to supplement these exercises with assigned discussion, supplementary reading, or evaluative assessment to promote increasingly more complex analysis and interpretation skills that might extend and enrich additional classroom role-playing experimentation.

The selected exercises are also intended to promote a classroom atmosphere of relaxed inquiry and risk-free exploration that encourages student performers to define a more individual, personal style of character interpretation and performance. As preliminary role-playing principles emerge in classroom performance assignments, the instructor should translate the basic characteristics discussed here into meaningful reading, speaking, or writing assignments that help to promote individual student interpretation and self-expression. Continued use of the selected exercises should enhance well-disciplined, imaginative strategies for advanced scene study and should encourage student performers to more easily identify role-playing opportunities that lead to perceptive and three-dimensional character portraits in classroom performance.

Exercise 1: "Star Search!"

Goals: To familiarize the student performer with the role that personal observation might play in character development; and to promote awareness of the basic principles of dramatic visualization.

Approach: Classroom performance should be firmly rooted in the "here and now," and student performers should include personal observation, immediate experience, and creative invention in an imaginative interpretation of the character portrait being drawn. Alertness and attention to detail to events and interesting personalities in all walks of life may provide the gesture, attitude, voice, mood, walk, hand prop, or distinguishing mannerism that gives vitality to an imaginative character portrait. If student performers are sensitive and acutely aware of their immediate surroundings, it may be possible to discover the creative impulse of transferring what has been overheard or witnessed from everyday life situations into a viable character portrait that is as authentic and honest as it might have been found to exist in the student's initial observation.

Like the "cub reporter," student performers should cultivate a journalistic attitude that explores the "who, what, where, when, and why" of the persons, things, and objects that surround daily activities and everyday happenings. This approach to objective observation also helps to promote a more personal, three-dimensional characterization that has depth, integrity, and believability because it is based upon a flesh-and-blood role model. Such a vivid, incisive character portrait mirrors current reality for student performers in a more direct and immediate reflection of characterization drawn from the common, instantly recognized walks of life familiar to all of us.

To promote an appreciation and understanding of the role that observation and the immediate experience of daily activities might play in character development, set aside a period of (2) weeks for a "star search." Instruct the student performers to observe closely--and with a critical eye--the

actions of three of those with whom they come in contact during the two-week period. Those ripe for observation may include parents, teachers, friends, and relatives; or the observation may be directed toward casual acquaintances, familiar persons, and strangers. Following the period of detailed observation--supplemented with a written character diary--have the student performers review the mannerisms, gestures, movements, vocal qualities, and any distinguishing personal habits of those observed with the class. Based upon the diary notations and personal recollections, instruct the student performers to sketch an initial, written character portrait for each person observed. The initial sketch should also include basic physical characteristics like age, height, and weight as well as more subtle emotional or intellectual characteristics like attitude, mood, and apparent point of view.

When the instructor is confident that the initial character sketches are detailed and an accurate description of what has been apparently overheard or witnessed in the observation, the instructor should encourage the student performers to discover in their observations a metaphor, or implied comparison, between the person observed and something inventive; and to incorporate complementary features or distinguishing mannerisms into a classroom performance that suggests the character portrait observed. For example, the detailed observation of the vocal quality of the casual acquaintance may suggest the performance metaphor of an "ostrich"; the personal mannerisms of the friend may suggest the performance metaphor of an "unbridled horse"; or the movement patterns of the stranger may suggest the performance metaphor of a "dance of death."

Now conclude the exercise by presenting student performers with a variety of short scenes from drama, novels, or short stories that include (2) characters involved in a conversation that suggests a "subtext" to their relationship--that is, an implied interaction existing beneath the surface of the

spoken language. The student performers should include appropriate vocal or physical characteristics in the classroom performance that were part of their previous observation assignment and "character diary" notations to suggest a flesh-and-blood character portrait in the selected scenes. Examples useful for this purpose are the "tea scene" in Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest, the "accusation scene" in Franz Kafka's The Trial, the "seduction scene" in Eugene O'Neill's Desire Under the Elms, the "theft scene" in Dr. Seuss' The Grinch Who Stole Christmas, the "patriotic speech scene" in Nathaniel Hawthorne's My Kinsman, Major Molineux, the "dream scene" in James Thurber's The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, the "pledge of allegiance scene" in Aristophanes' Lysistrata, or the "planting seed scene" in Pearl S. Buck's The Good Earth.

Exercise 2: "And The 'Beat' Goes On"

Goals: To promote the role of "mental symbols" in character development and to cultivate student performer awareness of dramatic visualization.

Approach: One of the basic ingredients of a vivid characterization is the student performer's creative ability to respond to the images suggested by words and phrases with a voice and a body that is both imaginative and expressive. However, the student performer must first conceptualize the images as a "mental symbol" before attempting to visualize the character; and this requires a perceptive and sensitive analysis of the selected scene as well as an emphatic identification and genuine response to the suggestive words or phrases. Student performer analysis and identification of character is a shared experience and a bond of mutual understanding that promotes the honest communication of actions and attitudes conveyed in a scene.

The first step in the process of conceptualizing images is to analyze the "beats" in a character's

dialogue. Beats are the "action maps" that chart the course of a character's alternating or changing points of view, mood, attitude, or objective in each section of the spoken text. Although beats are primarily a matter of individual interpretation and definition as revealed by the student performer's detailed analysis of the dialogue, they are also convenient performance road signs that may signal significant character turns in action, thought, or movement which must be addressed by corresponding vocal or physical changes that indicate an apparent change of character direction in a selected scene.

Using beats as "action maps" is a way of defining a character's motivation or primary objective in a selected scene and a convenient performance blueprint that outlines a character's specific goals in a moment of time or space in the playscript. Distinguishing character beats-- which may vary in length and duration--may provide valuable insights and reveal the subtext of a character's thought or point of view. The pattern of thought, behavior, mood, or action suggested by an analysis of character beats may also present rich "mental symbols" for inspired interpretation and classroom performance. Remind student performers, however, that beats do not exist in isolation; they are integral ingredients in the overall evolution of character development in the playscript and must be treated as a part of the whole dramatic mixture, not as independent and unrelated seasoning.

Begin the preliminary exploration of beats by having the student performers review the following excerpt from William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. In this scene, Juliet has just been informed by her Nurse that Tybalt, a cousin, has been killed in a sword fight with Romeo; to whom she has secretly been married. Juliet's concerns, fears, doubts, and regrets must all be voiced in different tones as she wavers from initial disbelief and self-pity to ultimate despair and shock at the reality of Tybalt's death and Romeo's banishment. The 'action map' of Juliet's objectives in each segment

Dialogue	Objectives Key Words
Shall I speak ill of him that is my husband?	*(Doubt)*
Ah, poor my lord, what tongue shall smooth thy name, When I, thy three-hours wife, have mangled it?	*(Self-Pity)*
But, wherefore, villain, dist thou kill my cousin?	*(Command)*
That villain cousin would have kill'd my husband: Back, foolish tears, back to your native spring; Your tributary drops belong to woe, Which you, mistaking, offer up to joy.	*(Regret)*
My husband lives, that Tybalt would have slain;	*(Rejoice)*
And Tybalt's dead, that would have slain my husband: All this is comfort; wherefore weep I then? Some word there was, worser than Tybalt's death, That murder'd me: I would forget it fain; But, O, it presses to my memory, Like damned guilt deeds to sinners' minds:	(Despair)
Tybalt is dead, and Romeo -- banished!	*(Shock)*

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and distinctly. Instruct the student performers to then voice the second objective so that it is as imaginative and vivid as the first; and then to continue to voice each objective with a precision and a clarity that gives significant vocal and physical contrast to the apparent changes in attitude or mood suggested by the character in the dialogue.

This "vocal pacing" of the contrasting changes in the character's attitude or mood--that results from an analysis of the dialogue and the suggested objectives--should provide a meaningful rhythm and tempo for the character's speech as well as for a dynamic and inspired visualization of the dramatic situation being described. When each of the specific objectives have been voiced with clarity and distinction, modify the intensity of the student performers and suggest that they connect with the "mental images" suggested by the objectives listed into a coherent pattern of behavior, action, and movement that best represents the character's point of view in this particular speech. Then have the student performers repeat the selection with appropriate phrasing that highlights and underscores the apparent changes in character thought or point of view.

When the instructor is confident that the student performers understand the basic role of analysis, beats, and objectives in giving vivid dimension to character development and interpretation, present the participants with a number of dramatic monologues. Instruct the student performers to analyze the dialogue, chart the actions, determine the objectives, indicate the "key words," and then unveil the mystery of the character in a solo classroom performance as the "beat" goes on! Examples useful for this purpose may include the "bridal tomb monologue" of Sophocles' Antigone, the "love sick monologue" of Phebe in William Shakespeare's As You Like It, the "stop thief monologue" of Harpagon in Moliere's The Miser, the "noble nose monologue" of Rostand's Cyrano de Bergerac, the "stamp collection monologue" of Jonathan in Arthur Kopit's Oh, Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung

You In The Closet and I'm Feeling So Sad, the "mama died monologue" of Lewis in Horton Foote's Cousins, the "marriage counseling monologue" of Father Donnally in Christopher Durang's The Marriage of Bette and Boo, or the "look in the mirror monologue" from Anna Deavers Smith's Fires in the Mirror.

Exercise 3: "Carry Your Character With You!"

Goals: To develop an awareness of the role that movement and physicalization might play in suggesting character in classroom performance.

Approach: Select thirteen or twenty-six student performers at random and ask them what is their favorite letter of the alphabet. Then present them with the following selection by an anonymous poet of the 17th century entitled "A Was An Archer."

A was an archer, and shot at a frog.

B was a blind man, and led by a dog.

C was a cutpurse, and lived in disgrace.

D was a drunkard, and had a red face.

E was an eater, a glutton was he.

F was a fighter, and fought with a flea.

G was a giant, and pulled down a house.

H was a hunter, and hunted a mouse.

I was an ill man, and hated by all.

J was a jackass, locked in its stall.

K was a knave, and he robbed great and small.

L was a liar, and told many lies.

M was a madman, and beat out his eyes.

N was a nobleman, nobly born.

O was an ostler, and stole horses' corn.

P was a pedlar, and sold many pins.

Q was a quarreller, and broke both his shins.

R was a rogue, and ran about town.

S was a sailor, and knavishly bent.

T was a tailor, a man of renown.

U was a usurer, took ten percent.

V was a viper, serpent-like.

W was a writer, and money he earned.

X was a Xenophon, prudent and learn'd.

Y was a yeoman, and worked with his hands.

Z was one Zeno the Great, but he's dead.

The instructor should define any unfamiliar words so that each student performer understands the selected phrase, and then each student performer should be directed to approach the classroom playing space in alphabetical order.

Each student performer should first strike a physical pose that is representative of the alphabet character, and then recite the phrase associated with the character in a voice thought to be appropriate

for the action being described. The student performer should then follow through with an action that is suggested by the alphabet character and end the presentation by freezing in the final pose that completes the suggested phrase. For example, student performer A might enter the playing space very cautiously as though stalking an invisible prey, spy the object of the search, draw an arrow to thread an imaginary bow, release the arrow after reciting the phrase associated with the character, and then freeze with fee apart, hands relaxed, and shoulders slightly tensed.

Each remaining student performer should repeat the exercise until all the letters of the alphabet have been performed and frozen character portraits are lined up across the classroom playing space in suggestive physical postures or poses that reflect the action suggested in the poem. Following active discussion of appropriate choices, suggestive poses, and the role of the body in the development of characterization, the exercise may be extended to the physical interpretation of characters in selected novels, playscripts, or short stories. Examples useful for this purpose might include a physical interpretation of the "rowdy boy" in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, the "forlorn woman" in Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, From Prison," the "stalking ghost" in William Shakespeare's Hamlet, the "dark figure" in Joseph Conrad's The Lagoon, the "tormented spirits" in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, the "knight errant" in Walter Van Tilburg Clark's The Ox-Bow Incident, the "political animals" in George Orwell's Animal farm, or the "mystical shadow" in William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying.

Conclusion

Successful classroom role-playing that promotes imaginative and performance approaches to characterization initially depends upon a student performer's ability to learn the technical skills of

interpretation; and to give life and meaning to the fictitious characters being studied. Careful analysis of the selected literature includes reading with a critical eye, isolating the mental symbols that clearly define character intention or motivation, and a classroom performance blueprint that encourages creative self-expression. The extent to which the selected exercises may be used effectively in classroom performance to reveal individual student interpretation and understanding of the literature being performed is the true measure of role-playing as it is directly related to the development of meaningful characterization.